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**Abstract**

This thesis is an investigation into the work of the art department in film. It opens up the discussion about the fact that although the work of art directors/production designers is a determining factor for the success of a film, it is often forgotten when talking about cinema. With the analysis of specific examples from contemporary cinema and television, this thesis outlines the importance of the art department and its influence on film and television as mediums of visual expression. The practical project is a detailed description of a personal experience of working in the art department. It describes the process of creating the art for a short film from the development stage to the wrap-up providing the thesis with a practical angle in relation to the research and analysis done on the subject. The art department’s work is crucial to any film but not all of it manifests itself directly on screen. In order to create a powerful, coherent story art directors and their crew have to face different challenges, make compromises and sacrifices in order to stay true to the story and reach the best possible results.

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**Keywords** art department, art direction, production design, film, cinema,

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## **‘What doesn’t move and is usually out of focus’**

The experience of working in the art department in the short film *Mamartuile*, *El Día de la Bandera*.

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‘I then dare to pose the question that has been plaguing me ever since the first time I noticed the credit on the screen. “Mr Fleisher,” I ask tentatively, “what does an art director do? ‘After what I presume to be reflective thought, he replies proudly: “The art director is responsible for everything you see on the screen...” he pauses to consider the modifying clause: “...that doesn’t move...” then searching for a further amendment, wistfully adds: “... and is usually out of focus.”’

[1]

## INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with the art world of the film industry was when during my last year of bachelor's degree, I was looking through different curriculums for master's degrees and I came across one that was called Production Design. It sounded so interesting and I almost couldn't believe it was actually a thing I could study. Although I did not get into the course, I stayed hooked on the idea of one day working to help create the look of a film.

Although I decided that the Visual Culture and Contemporary Art program at Aalto University would give me a better opportunity to explore the visual arts, I took Production Design as my minor during my master's studies. The two programs worked well together: the major introduced me to different ideas and artistic practices that I could draw inspiration from and the minor helped me think about film design in more practical terms.

It was during the production of *Roma* (directed by Alfonso Cuarón, production design by Eugenio Caballero, 2018), where I was working as a production assistant, that I really understood the extent of what the art department really does. Since it was one of the biggest Mexican productions in a long while, I did not only get to work with some of the best professionals in the industry but also with a huge range of people with different job descriptions that I did not even know existed. Since it is set in a particular time period, and the director wanted authenticity, the amount of research and work that needed to be done by the art department for the film meant that at some points the number of personnel reached almost 200 people only in this one department. That includes of course all the construction people, electricians, riggers, assistants, graphic designers, etc. Seeing the people work and having first-hand insight into this new world, I became more and more excited about the

possibility of one day being a part of it. It is where I met art director Oscar Tello, who was the assistant production designer and when he invited me to work with him on the short film *Mamartuile, El Día de la Bandera* (eng. 'Flag Day', 2017) I accepted without hesitation. It was an invaluable opportunity to learn and get into the art world (and it really is a whole different world) of film working closely with experienced people from the very beginning of the project to the end. My job title was going to be 2nd decorator's assistant but before the decorator even came into the picture there was a lot of work to be done. We had to prepare the research of the different locations and visual inspirations in order to define the look and feel of the short film. I was lucky enough that Oscar Tello took me onto the project so early on so I could learn about the very beginnings of creating the art of the film. I could participate and witness the development and transformation of ideas and visual references to real sets on location as well as their destruction after wrap.

As my first job in the art department, this project provided me with very needed experience of the entire process of creating the look of the film. I realised the amount of work and challenges the art director and his crew have to face while preparing for the filming. This included the time and budget constraints, logistical matters and the creative struggles.

This thesis is an investigation into the undervalued and often forgotten work of the art department in cinema based on my personal experience. In the first part I will draw a discussion in relation to my thesis statement on the real importance and influence of the art department on film/television as a medium and as visual expression. In the second part I will describe at length the process of creating the art for the short film *Mamartuile* that I worked on as my thesis project. In the last chapter I will present conclusions about my personal experience of working in the art department in connection to the research I have done on the subject.

## I. THE ART DEPARTMENT

There is an infinite amount of books and articles on film but most discussions and film analysis often begin and end with the names of directors. There is considerably less literature to choose from that analyses and explains the work of art directors, production designers, decorators and the rest of the crew. This may be because, according to Fionnuala Halligan, the art department's work is 'designed not to be noticed' [2] and everyone has just been doing a very good job so far. Or it could be due to the fact that the last say and complete power normally belongs to the director and she, as well as the actors, take the spotlight. A film is made to be seen as a whole, a singular piece orchestrated by the director and therefore she gets to receive much of the credit. However, there are directors that are less visual than others and depend heavily on the production designer and the rest of his crew to visualise the script and help her see it as well. It is really surprising that in interviews, film directors do not mention production designers or art directors more, thinking that their work is a big part of the reason the films get attention or win any awards. They are one of the first people that the directors get in touch with and who help them bring their visions to life. In the introduction of 'Filmcraft: Production Design' Fionnuala Halligan writes about the blurred definition and perception of the profession of production designers:

'Of all the crafts involved in bringing a film to the screen, the production designer's is probably the haziest in terms of public perception yet it is the absolute key to the success or failure of a shoot. They're the mood magicians, the wizards of illusion, who command the art department to realise the director's vision for the screen on a certain date, in a certain set of circumstances, and more importantly these days, for a certain price. The production designer will always be the first person to be hired onto a 'show''. [3]

Surely there are different types of directors, some of them are more collaborative than others and some are more of obsessive control freaks. There are different ways of making films and I do not think there is one particular correct formula to do it. Cinema is versatile and no two projects are the same. Because of that it is possible to explore the medium and different ways of storytelling to its extent. Some directors give more freedom to the production designer, some give less but there is no doubt that the job they do is extremely important for film as a medium and as a visual art form. However, it is still possible to meet a person who works in film and does not know what the ‘art people’ do. I mentioned this issue to a friend who is also an art director once and asked him if he knows why that maybe be, why their work is so unappreciated. He replied that he did not know and told me a story how in a press-conference-like event, where he was also present, the journalists were asking the actors questions of ‘how did you do this or that’ and of course they had no idea, because it is the art director and his crew that make the magic happen. Since the actors, as well as many other members of the crew and the audience only see the sets already dressed up and ready, all the tricks and lamps already tested and working, they take it as a given. Not many people on a film set or in the audience will think, where did this come from? How did they get it? How did they get all this stuff here? How long did it take them? Who made all these signs and labels? etc. It is paradoxical that the work of the art department is the most visible on screen but is so often overlooked when talking about film.

**‘Film design is so incredibly influential, yet at its very best, we don’t even see it. Production designers create worlds for us to believe in and when it all works, we accept the finished product as “real”. Absolutely nothing in feature filmmaking is real. What you see on screen is a blend of reality, film reality, and some good old-fashioned smoke and mirrors, physically pulled together by production designers and their talented teams.’ [4]**

The story of setting up this *film reality*, the world of preparation (because it feels like a world by itself) can be as exciting as the one being told in the film. Like the famous example of the mechanical sharks from *Jaws* (1975) that were so complicated to operate and caused a number of problems for the film delaying it and costing millions for the production. It is what contributed to the iconic idea of using only the fin of the shark in order to create suspense, since the crew had to wait because the shark models were not ready so they had to improvise [5]. Jack Fisk, the production designer of *The Revenant* (2015) also had a lot of challenges working in the harsh weather conditions and the specific landscape. In an interview with theartsdesk.com he talks about how they had to alter the landscape in order to maintain the colour palette and the specific feeling of film reality they were trying to create:

‘We tried to minimise using colours that drew attention to themselves, unless they were necessary for the scene, like the red of the blood, which would sometimes show up greyer. [...] If there’s any lightness in a forest, it’ll stop your eye from looking further, so we painted thousands of grey trees with a dark wash of dry colour and water because I wanted to make sure we could clean it off easily afterwards, or that nature could. You worry about how it will affect the trees’ growth, and the park service was watching us closely. We were shooting a lot on Indian reservations, and nobody voluntarily says, “Paint my tree dark.”’ [6]

## **FILM AS COLLABORATIVE EFFORT AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE ART DEPARTMENT**

One of the most exciting things about filmmaking is that it is a collaborative effort, even though most of the time there is a one totalitarian leader. Communication is a crucial part of the filmmaking process and it is key to achieving powerful results. Since the art department’s work is such a huge part of the film it is absolutely essential that the production designer communicates with the rest of the crew. There has to be a good balance and understanding between departments in relation to the budget and what is possible. According to Fionnuala Halligan:



‘Production design is hugely collaborative – apart from the director, it’s the most collaborative position in a film unit, which cuts across every single department. From locations to costumes, construction crews and visual effects, the designer must have the ability to communicate his or her vision with sufficient impact to get the thousands of decisions shooting a film entails made, and made quickly, before the clapperboard finally snaps.’ [7]

Miscommunication cannot only mean growing expenses but also discontinuity in the story being told. It has to feel ‘real’ in the logic of the world of the film and the story. However, since making a powerful film is a joint effort, the work of solely the art department does not mean anything without the other departments. Sarah Street, Sue Harris, and Tim Bergfelder in their book ‘Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination’ state that the set or a location does not by itself constitute the image on screen. There are many significant factors and consequential elements that influence the way we see the set and the image on screen. In their own words:

‘With regard to the problem of discussing set design as a separate and independent entity, this reiterates the point that sets on their own do not create space on the screen. Designed sets are realised cinematically only in conjunction with the work of the cinematographer, who through framing and lighting devices animates the fragmentary construction and imbues it with an imaginary wholeness, and the editor, who during post-production adds a temporal dimension to spatial relationships, and thereby anchors them in a constructed reality. [...] Set design is fundamentally hybrid and fluid, both as a profession and as a field of study.’ [8]

That is why it is crucial to collaborate successfully with other departments and simply with all the people that work on the film. For example, the same set shot in different ways can have a very different effect so the production designer cannot make important decisions about locations and set elements without consulting the director of photography. Vincent LoBrutto in ‘The Filmmaker’s Guide to Production Design’ states that the way the film looks is a result of the collaboration between the production designer, director and the DP. If, for example, the DP joins

the project later, the whole process of designing the sets can suffer:

‘The functionality of the set and approach to color and texture may require changes that could have been resolved during early planning among the three collaborators. If sets have to be redesigned, rebuilt, or repainted because of color interpretation issues, it will cost the production time, money, and most important, cohesion. A vision or look of a film must be an interlocking collaboration of design and photographic composition.’ [9]

Good acting can as well change the way we look at what is seen on screen a great deal. If the art department have done their job well to create a certain ambience, tone and feeling, bad acting can break all of this effort in seconds as well as the established connection to the audience. LoBrutto in his book outlines the Credo of a production designer saying that it is crucial that the craft (work of the art department) stays true to the story, interprets it by honouring its intent. Also that ‘A good script properly visualized is paramount in making a good film.’, ‘Skillful casting and high-caliber performances are essential in making a good film.’ And that ‘Craft gives meaning, interpretation, and emotional and psychological depth to the story and to the actors creating the characters.’ [10]

One of the television series that left a very strong impression in my mind, as an example of the kind of effect that can be achieved with the successful collaboration between departments is the first season of *True Detective* (2014-). The overall visual style feels extremely defined and coherent throughout the whole season. It provided the series with a very specific tone and atmosphere which felt as charged with meaning, grim and powerful as Matthew McConaughey’s character, Rust Cohle. The inside world of his magnetic character seems as bleak as the town they live in. In the first episode of the season, Rust describes the world as a one big ghetto, ‘giant gutter in outer space’. It seems like the world that they live in is a direct illustration of his views where people are killed and their bodies are exhibited in all kinds of cruel ways. Where a killer is not just a killer but some sort sick version of an artist that creates

elaborated installations out of his crimes. The colour scheme is dark, cold and desaturated, a lot of greys and dark green tones dominate the screen. The sky seems to never look really blue, it looks more like different shades of grey instead. Here ‘The landscape is the third lead of the show’ [11]. It is grim but not barren, it is ruined, polluted, damaged and even toxic, like the characters of the series. In the words of the creative director of the series: ‘This link—the relationship between broken landscapes and broken people—has been central to all our thinking’ [12]. This proves how important is the right location for the success of the work of the art department and of the entire project. It can not only support the characters’ three-dimensionality but also it expands audience’s understanding of the kind of world they live in and how it affects their inner struggle: ‘This isn’t the zombie plague. This isn’t vampires and warlocks. The phrase that has been echoing in my head since our first discussions on the project is that we are witnessing a ‘personal apocalypse.’” [13].

Creating such a specific world and tone of the series puts extra pressure on the art department of finding the right place for every set, which can often involve sacrifices. According to Alex DiGerlando, the production designer of *True Detective*, it was a big challenge to find and prepare the place for the wooden burned-down church that appears in the second episode of the first season. The church here is a very strong symbol of the lack of faith and hope in the world of *True Detective*. That is why it was so important to find the right location and construct the right kind of set even if it created a lot of logistic and technical difficulties. In one interview DiGerlando explains that once they found the perfect location, they ran into a lot of difficulties because there was no road or access to where they wanted to build the church. The construction of this set required a lot of machinery and construction teams as well as a lot of lumber. It was also impossible to build it in pieces so everything had to be done on location.



*True Detective* (2014-) stills from the series.

‘It was a logistical nightmare. In the early stages of doing that, when we had first found that location, there was a lot of questioning whether it was a wise decision. We couldn’t even drive trucks out there. How we were going to make this? And the producer was really reluctant to spend tens of thousands of dollars to put down a gravel road in order to build the set. His logic, and it makes sense, was that he wanted to put the money on the screen. Eventually we decided it was the right thing to do, and arguably it was one of the most iconic images of that whole show – this dilapidated church in the middle of nowhere with the oil refineries blazing fire in the distance.’ [14]

The presence of the church and the landscape around it create a very strong effect adding to the tone of the series and increasing its impact of the viewers. It creates an iconic image that stays with the audience throughout the series. I think this last reference of DiGerlando explaining the difficulties of building this particular set is a very good example of the kind of problems the art department has to face and what the job actually entails. The comment about the producer not wanting to spend money is very relevant to the subject of this thesis. It addresses the problem of the art department’s work being unappreciated and its real influence on the success of the film undervalued. Many producers in film or advertising tend to lower their costs through the art department, forgetting how much of a difference it makes having great production design or cheap one. Also, it is often forgotten that not everything that makes a difference in the art department’s work will be seen directly on screen. However, since the budgets are usually limited, another problem for the producers and the production designer is to decide how to spend it. Here successful collaboration is also of crucial importance, wrong decisions could cost overall quality of the project. It is impossible to have the right amount of money you need for every set, there have to be choices made, what is more important to the story and will have more impact. Alex DiGerlando continues:

‘Someone once told me that producing a movie is not about saving money, it’s about spending money wisely. That’s the thing, you just have to prioritize. We could spend the money and dress up that Dora Lange mother’s house, and that would cost us X amount of money, but that’s going to take resources away

from these other things that we’re definitely going to build, because we are not going to find them as is.’ [15]

This series is an interesting example in terms of props as well. One of the crucial elements are The Devil’s Nests that the killer builds and leaves at his crime scenes. These bird traps/Devils’ Nests also have an iconic presence in the series. More than 100 of these ‘sculptures’ made by an artist called Joshua Walsh using materials that the killer would use. “‘We were also told all of this artwork is the killer’s way of ascension to reach this spiritual plain that he has in his mind,” DiGerlando said.’ [16]



*True Detective* (2014-) stills from the series.



So the pieces are an intent to create symbolism and meaning in a place that has a clear lack of it. They are ominous and creepy, a strange distorted manifestation of the fear of meaninglessness and a thirst for faith that is felt in the town. Their presence in the toxic landscape and horrible murder scenes strengthens the sense of earlier mentioned ‘personal apocalypse’.

Already the introduction to Rust Cohle’s character sets a clear tone of a very troubled, complicated person. The first episode of the first season of the series, after some images of the killer walking in the darkness, starts with the interview of Woody Harrelson’s character Marty Hart. He describes rust as ‘raw-bone’, ‘edgy’ and ‘strange’. In the same episode, the detectives interviewing him give another clue about the character that we are about to see, by saying that they ‘have heard some stories’. The first time Rust Cohle appears on screen, the images are very dark and it is only his back that the audience sees. He is clearly drunk and the voiceover, which is Marty, explains that he showed up like that for the dinner at his house. Then it cuts to Cohle in the present day, much older and the audience gets a full introduction to the character which makes it clear that it is an extremely troubled person and life has not been good to him. Matthew McConaughey’s acting is strong and convincing. He is a person that has nothing to lose, because he actually has nothing. He is self-destructive and while he worked in the force he lived in the cases he was solving, he ‘lives in his own mind’. [17]

Alex DiGerlando, the production designer of *True Detective* describes the set of Rust’s house:

‘It’s no more and no less than what he needs to survive, and that tells you everything you need to know about him. He doesn’t need anything extraneous. “They wound up jettisoning nearly everything from the room, including a sofa bed, a box spring, a nightstand. “It pays off later on when Maggie shows up and you see him by himself flashing his flashlight at the antlers, trying to figure it out,” DiGerlando said. “He doesn’t want the distraction of anything else. The case is where he lives. That is, he lives in his own mind and there’s nothing extraneous in there.”’ [18]

As the production designer explains, the space the character lives in, tells the audience everything that is necessary about what kind of person Rust is. Having lost his daughter in a car accident, his marriage as well as mental health was affected. He has nothing, he needs nothing or no one. There are only the bare necessities in his apartment and books about crime. There are only the bare necessities in his apartment and books about crime. He lives completely through his work and does not hope for anything else. The dark, cold analytical style of acting of Matthew McConaughey goes exactly in tune with the design of his home.



*True Detective* (2014-) still from the series,  
Rust Cohle’s apartment.

Alex DiGerlando, in an interview has explained what kind of influence he feels his work has on the actors and their performance:

‘All those details that I was talking about cigarette burns on the tables or little graffiti that the camera sees but you don’t even totally register, is as much for the actors as it is for the final product. When the actors walk into these places, you want to give them as much as possible. That really helps them to get into the character. If there’s a lot of details in there, they can put their focus on those details and sometimes it helps them with the scene. I’ve had a lot of actors thank me for a level of detail on the sets.’ [19]

*True Detective* is a very good example of the extent of the art department’s work and the kind of influence it makes to the overall quality of the film as well as can help the actors in their performance. Genuine props like the Devil’s Nests can make a lot of difference in creating the feeling of the film. Another example are the murder scene photos that appear during the series. In the ‘Making of’ video of *True Detective*, the property master Linda Reiss explains how they recreated every single crime scene and made up models to take the photos. Because in the series these photos were taken before all the digital developments, they also took and processed all the photos on film to make it as ‘period-correct as possible’ [20]. Even though this kind of effort of the art department is not directly visible on screen, it makes all the difference. There is a different look and feel to every genuine thing on screen and even though it can be hardly visible for the audience, it can really help the actors to see the real thing instead of a cheaply-made mock-up.

As the actor can provide the character analysis with multi-layered depth by analysing and preparing for the role, it also gives meaning and intensity to the sets and the overall design. At the same time the production designer and his team can provide the actor with the aid to get deeper into the character, to understand it and do the scenes in the best way possible. I think in *True Detective*, the successful collaborative effort results in an unforgettable, powerful and sophisticated viewing experience.

The work that the art department does not only create the background for the action that does not move. It creates an environment, a base and a history for the actors of the place they are in, what happened there, what kind of mood it gives and a feeling of their characters as well as their emotional state even if it is only visible to them and not to the audience. In turn, good acting provides the sets with another dimension and brings it to life, makes it feel real. It is history, it is another part of the story that tells of things that are ‘between the lines’. ‘An architect designs a space for the future. Who’s going to live there? What are they going to do there? But a film designer, in my opinion, designs a space for everything that’s happened there before the point in time when the story is being told.’ [21].

## **DESIGN DECISIONS THAT CREATE WORLDS AND ARE NOT MEANT TO BE UNNOTICED**

In good art direction, no detail can be forgotten, every single thing is important to create the image, to blend it into a whole that is much more than just the background. To make it feel alive, as if touched and altered by the characters themselves. Robb Wilson King writes about his work on *Breaking Bad* (2008-2009):

‘I have to live in the narrative and constantly search for interesting ways to convey it. The story is a growing life-form that has to be captured first in spirit, and only then with locations and constructed sets. These physical environments have to breathe life. No moment is a throwaway. Everything has meaning, a subtext, and serves our inspired scripts on multiple levels.’ [22]

All of this constitutes a creation of a new world from scratch. This world has to have its rules and every element of every frame has to be in tune with those rules. For me, the most interesting production design is something that creates imagines a new world and a new system. Creating images that we have no equivalent for in our everyday life and giving them life of their own. The Oscar-nominated *Arrival* (2016), inspired by the artwork of James Turrell [23] is an interesting example of

reinventing the completely new idea of what alien life form could be and what kind of means of communication could they use. Already the shape of the ship and the entrance to the space where the meetings with the aliens happen dictates a completely new set of rules that apply to their extra-terrestrial world.

“‘I watched a lot of sci-fi movies to see what has been done, and I realized that since *2001: A Space Odyssey*, except for some atypical examples, most movies used the same type of design lights, windows,” he explains. “*Arrival’s* spaceship had to be a surprise, a different aesthetic, and it had to give you the sense of beauty and the sense that in beauty, there can be danger.”’ [24]

The design of the exterior and the interior of the ship seems so relatively simple that it builds suspense in waiting to discover what does the alien life look like. It provokes the feeling that their civilization is living by a completely different set of rules. Due to the fact that the kind of design had not been used in films involving extra-terrestrial life forms before, it feels fresh and creates a lot of tension because the audience does not know what to expect.



*Arrival* (2016) still from the film.

‘The confined space is very imposing. The wall texture was created to resemble sediment rock, as this long corridor represents the layers of the history and wisdom of the alien civilization. [...] We wanted that main chamber to remind us of a classroom, as it was important for us to create subtle connections between the aliens and Louise. We also wanted to create a contrast between the peacefulness felt inside the dark interview chamber of the ship and the chaos felt inside the white military tents. There had to be a soothing James Turrell-like atmosphere felt within the alien chamber.’ [25]

In the opening pages of the book ‘Film Worlds’ by Daniel Yacavone, there is a quote by David Lynch: ‘You see, once you start down a road to make a film you enter a certain world. And certain things can happen in that world, and certain things can’t... So you begin to know these rules for your world, and you’ve got to be true to those rules.’ [26]. In the case of *Arrival*, the design of the space ship is crucially important to the set of rules that being set in the world of the film. It is what sets the tone and introduction to the kind of world the viewers are invited to. It is a mysterious world where flash-forwards and languages as weapons are possible. *Arrival* is an example of a film world that is mostly similar to ours with an extra-terrestrial element in terms of design. There are constant juxtapositions of the elements of the earth and the other life form. The headquarters of the military on earth are messy, overloaded with equipment and people, they are temporary tents, that represent the nature of human kind. There is a sense of chaos and in the ships of the aliens there is a sense of calm, peacefulness making it clear that the life form that came on those ships is much more advanced and has been around much longer than humans [27]. The production designer Patrice Vermette explains this juxtaposition:

‘We also wanted to contrast this alien technology with our modest effort to access them. The military and scientific teams would approach the alien shell, sitting in the back of white pickup trucks, and would then need to step into a scissor lift in order to access the portal and go up the ship’s dark shaft. A matter-of-fact approach was taken to ground the story in reality.’ [28]



So the contrast of the design decisions sets up a relation for the audience with the familiar things on earth at the same time helping them familiarise with the characters. It helps to establish a connection with the film and its set of rules and analyse the differences of our race and the aliens. The design of the ship, however, is what sets the tone and rules in the first place and makes this juxtaposition necessary in order for the story/script to reach its full potential.

Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* (2003) is a completely different example of film design in creating a world. Although it is similar to *Arrival* in relation to significant design decisions that influence the entire tone of the film, *Dogville* takes it to a completely other level. Peter Grant's designed theatre-like set is an example of design that is not meant to remain just a background. Its whole idea is to attract attention to itself, at least in the beginning. The lack of decoration and the simplicity of the design strips the viewers of the ability to feel comfortable and relate to the world they are seeing so easily. In Lars von Trier's words:

'I think that the theatrical style that *Dogville* represents is taking that idea of artificiality one step further. The whole medium has to do with make-believe it's not life that you see up on the screen. But part of the thrill is that we have to work as an audience to make it into a story, or a character, or life, or whatever. So if you simplify it even more and make it more abstract, you have to work even harder, but it can be more fulfilling also.' [29]

The necessities of decoration are stripped to a minimum, leaving only the essential elements. As mentioned before, in powerful set design no element, or detail goes to waste, everything adds to the history of a character, a place or circumstances but a heavily decorated set can be very forgiving. For example, a lot of the books that fill the shelves of particular sets, do not even have pages, they are filled with polyurethane or other material. In *Dogville*, however, every single thing that appears on stage is of crucial importance.

'It's not simple to stylize it; there has to be meaning. One of the rules we had was that whatever prop would be there would be something that, at one point in the film, was needed. If you look at the props in the film, you will know that, at a certain point, they will be used for something. And that's also a technique from computer games.' [31]

In the first chapter when Grace arrives to Dogville, Tom gives the introduction to the town's people using the figurines in the shop window as a metaphor. He says: 'Those awful figurines say more about the people in this town than many words.' The tacky figurines are there for a reason, as everything on set, and there are seven of them – as there are seven children in the family of Chuck and Vera. It does not seem like a coincidence when Grace orders the children to be killed in the same way Vera broke her figurines. These figurines, an element that is basically useless in the real world, that is meant only for decoration, here become one of the most important props on set. Their presence is crucial and filled with meaning.



*Dogville* (2013) still from the film.

These particular props are used as a tool to express the different views that Grace and the rest of the township have on Dogville. The town's people see them as ugly useless things, as Vera says before breaking them 'I believe smashing them is less of a crime than making them'.

However, Grace, that sees the town as a place with hopes and dreams, does not see the figurines or the town as awful, because she still has hope. Dogville for her, is a new start, where she could create a new life and build it little by little as she goes acquiring the figurines. It seems as if once she has all of them she will finally have her life together once again. During the scene when the figurines are broken the voiceover explains the significance of these props: 'They were the offspring of the meeting between the township and her. They were the proof that in spite of everything, her suffering had created something of value'. It is her work and hopes materialised, they are like her children, fruits of her suffering and they get broken mercilessly by Vera. Even after the town starts treating Grace worse and worse, they stop paying her for her chores and she cannot buy the rest of the figurines, Tom helps her to acquire the rest. It shows how much hope and effort she put into the town and that even after all they did to her she kept believing that she could still build something there until the very end. During the scene where Vera breaks the figurines, voiceover here again explains to the viewer that the sound of the breaking figurines, to Grace, sounds like breaking flesh. 'It is, in fact, the human capacity to make something out of nothing that is at the heart of this story, which rushes forward on the strength of assumptions and lies, misunderstandings and omissions.'. In *Dogville*, 'Things are never what they appear to be: cheap and sentimental figurines take on the significance of an offspring, and the dog's bone and collar become important markers in a drama where greed and lust blur the boundaries between species.' [32].

These figurines prove the importance of the work of the art department. How the right prop can provide the characters and the story with deeper meaning and help to express things that dialogues or monologues cannot. The breaking of the figurines, three quarters into the

film ends up having such a strong effect, as the audience we can understand very clearly what Grace is feeling. This scene illustrates the effect of the production design and the decision of having little to no decoration on set can have. The figurines as the props that have no real practical function, compared to other props, become a very strong icon in the film. They stand out because of the bare set, that artificially increases their importance and gets the audience feeling attached to them as Grace is. The breaking of this element signifies the end of hope, it is indicated to the audience that from then on, things are only going to get worse.

The production design of *Dogville* comes to its full power during the scene of the rape, when Chuck takes advantage of Grace, in his own home. With multiple angles, Lars von Trier juxtaposes the horrible thing that is happening in one of the houses, behind "closed doors", with the quiet town life. The other citizens of Dogville are going around their usual daily routine while Grace is trying to fight off Chuck. The beginning of the scene is filmed mainly in close-ups, which starts to feel claustrophobic:

'The intimacy is unbearable, and it is heightened by the whispering voices that highlight the oppressive small-town life. The second part of the scene, the actual rape, is dominated by long shots; Chuck and Grace are in the background but the rape remains clearly visible if we look through the towns-people in the foreground and the background, thereby communicating the complicity of all the citizens of Dogville. The scene thus pushes the spectator from an unbearable intimacy into a number of more 'structural shots' in a way that invites intellectual engagement while remaining excruciating in its emotional charge'. [33]

Again, like with the figurine props, this scene is made so striking because of the unique design of the set. It illustrates in a very obvious manner the real nature of the town and its people at the same time commenting on society and its ignorance in general. The effect it creates is extraordinary and feels almost forced, which it probably is.





*Dogville* (2013) stills from the film.

The production design of *Dogville* directs the viewers' attention in a very specific, self-evident way at the same time making them work harder than normally. But it is also rewarding in terms of grasping the nuances of the story and what the film is trying to communicate [34]. The god-like view allows the audience to judge the actions of the particular characters and take into account the rest of the town at the same time.

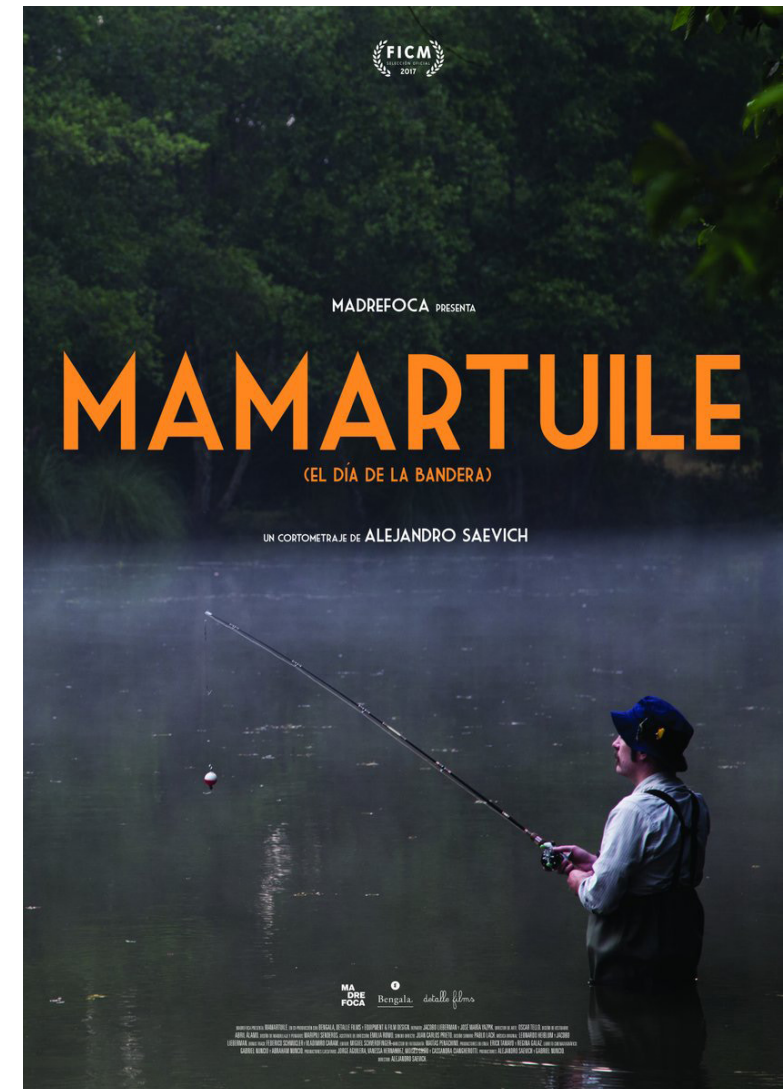
'As morally myopic as the town's residents are, the God-like viewer can see and judge them perfectly. We watch in outrage and disbelief as a resident rapes lead actress Nicole Kidman in plain sight of the entire town. In that sense, few of the town's residents can see the obvious any better than *Dogville*'s literally blind resident Mr. McKay, who thinks he can keep his handicap secret by constantly describing the progress of the shadow cast by a church spire outside his window.' [35]

The audience is guided where to look in quite an obvious way despite the fact that there are always multiple elements/characters that are in the view. There is no intent of trying to hide the artificiality here, it is self-conscious and deliberate and that is why the effect of it on its audience is so unique and extraordinary.

Even though the action happens in the United States of America, Lars von Trier at the time of making this movie had never been there. The town has a name because it has to have one, but at the end of the day the action could be happening anywhere. In an interview with the 'New York Times' Lars von Trier said: 'For me it's about America, even though it's about what he had seen in Europe. Somehow America is a canvas that you can use. Of course the film is, like Kafka's book, inspired by my own meeting with not Americans but mostly Danish people. It could be a place anywhere.' [36] It is just a story Lars von Trier is telling his audience. It is like a story someone once told him that happened in the US that he is now trying to retell. There are no buildings or streets, just traces of it, imagined by the director and constructed by the production designer. 'It is a fantasy of America, but not an American fantasy.' [37]

Although the set design is more reminiscent of one of a theatre play, in the case of *Dogville*, it is used in an authentic way in order to express something only cinema can. Through editing and framing the theatrical setting gets a completely new meaning, it becomes more of an idea of a village and not something that is trying to be one. It is an “illustration” – a word that is used a lot during the film. Although this can be traced back to my earlier point about that a set does not constitute a space on its own, the design is the main element of this story, it is what makes the film absolutely unique and so powerful. It establishes a very authentic world that is reminiscent of the one the audience is familiar with but indicates that the rules here are different. However, the framing is what elevates the set design providing it with meaning that is impossible to reach with just the art department’s work. The coherent and powerful film world is created when all the parts and departments of a production communicate and work in unison to realise the artistic vision.

## II. THE PROJECT – ART DIRECTION FOR SHORT FILM *MAMARTUILE, EL DÍA DE LA BANDERA*



*Mamartuile, El Día de la Bandera* (eng. 'Flag Day', 2017)

Short film, duration: 11min 40s.

Directed by: Alejandro Saevich

Produced by: Madrefoca

Art direction: Oscar Tello

Decoration: Carmen Guerrero

My role: Assistant to the art director and the decorator. In the credits appear as Assistant Decorator (es. Asistente de decoración)

Synopsis: The President of Mexico is faced with a dilemma: A new African nation wants to use the Mexican flag as their own and are offering a reasonable amount of gold for it.

## THE STORY

(I translated and shortened the original screenplay in the form of this treatment in order for the reader to fully understand the story, and the different design decisions made during the production process)

The President, in his office in the residential palace, is putting on a vinyl disk to his turntable. Meanwhile in the National Palace an employee in front of a glass cabinet with the Mexican flag tries to clean a stain on the glass but realizes it is inside the cabinet. The employee and the chief of maintenance go to the secretary's office and from there, the three of them go to the housekeeper that has the little golden key which opens the cabinet. The employee tries to reach into the cabinet to clean the stain and drops the flag. At that moment Cavazos arrives, who is the President's advisor. He and the secretary salute each other with subtle nods. In his office the President is practicing some dance moves, and singing to the music quietly. The secretary and Cavazos are watching him. When the music ends, the secretary is indicated to leave, and Cavazos approaches the President. He tells him that there is a problem and a notice from Mamartuile. There is some confusion on how to pronounce the name. Cavazos explains that in North Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya have formed an alliance. The flag they chose for their new country is exactly the same as Mexico's. The President

asks for a report on the country with a lot of discretion and puts another record on his record player. A donkey is seen crossing the field while the security people are observing it. The President is fishing in the artificial lake, Cavazos lets him know that the government of Mamartuile is formally apologizing but they will not change their flag because the white and green represent Tunisia, the red Morocco and they really like the coat of arms. Cavazos and the President walking outside notice a zebra. The President explains that it is a gift from the Russians and is due to global warming. The government of Mamartuile is offering gold to Mexico in exchange for the flag. The President and Cavazos decide to send a trustworthy person to Mamartuile to negotiate. In the wood workshop the President and Cavazos are discussing the change of the flag. The gold will be accepted and the change of the flag will be presented as sign of modernization, redefining the Mexican identity. Cavazos shows the new flag design to the President. Various animals are seen in the field. In the President's office, Cavazos informs the President that the subversive movement toppled the government, and the North African countries are going to go back to their previous names and territories. The President understands disappointed that if there is no flag, there is also no gold and the negotiator they sent is collateral damage. ¡Viva México! (eng. long live Mexico).

## THE SCREENPLAY

When I read the script a few times, I got immediately excited about being able to participate in realising this project. Not only because it was my first time working in the art department, but also because the script was well written, simple and funny. Reading it made me realize the importance of good writing. It gives a better sense of the tone of the film and as a reader you begin to see how it will turn out, what it will look like and the kind of film it will be. Then it becomes easier to decide whether you want to be a part of it or not. The light farce that the script was written in described perfectly the kind of light the Mexican president is seen in the eyes of his people. Although the short film is not based on any of the real presidents of Mexico, it ridicules in a subtle

way the incapability of many presidents to induce change and really care for their country. They are more like puppets put there just so there would be someone to blame and give public appearances.

After reading the screenplay it became clear that this is not going to be an easy job for anyone. Although it is a short film and the budget was bigger than most other shorts, there was a large number of sets that would not be cheap to decorate. The office of the President would obviously involve some expensive beautiful furniture and a set like a wood workshop will require a lot of tools and other objects to make it look realistic. We made a breakdown of the sets and in the extended list we had 14 sets from which 4 would be the most important ones: the presidential office, the room with the flag, the secretary's office and the wood workshop. After determining the important sets that will either have the most screen time or are narratively most important, we started the basic research and the search for references. Ultimately we had to prepare a visualization presentation for the director to communicate the kind of feel it will have, the type of furniture, decoration and key elements that we were imagining. In the beginning the action was set to happen in the present day but at the end it was changed to sometime around the late 90s. However, it did not change the mood of the sets that much, it only made a difference in some props like the cell phones and watches the characters would have. Also, the warehouses from where we rented most of the items, do not have that many modern things, so it was not hard to find the right props to go with the time period and communicate the right sensation.

We also had to make a breakdown of the props and decoration we are going to need for every set. This list is a big help when preparing the sets and thinking what kind of props the actors would have to have with them in every scene. It involves all the items that we would need for the sets which also helped in thinking where could we find them, which items are the most difficult to find and how we are going to transport them all. Since it is a short film and our crew was rather small, we would

have take care of the decoration, the props and the graphic design ourselves.

## VISUALIZATION

Since it was only a short film of approximately 10 minutes and was not going to be set too far in the past, the final visualization involving props was rather simple and around 20 pages. The goal of this visualization was to illustrate the kind of decoration the sets will have and try to communicate the general feeling of the tone of the short film to the director and the rest of the art department. For this purpose, the presentation was not extremely elaborative, since it was not going to have any other use than that. Preparing the visualizations for feature films is a whole other art. There is not only much more work and research involved because of the volume of the script and numbers of sets, but also they play a crucial role in the process of trying to find financing in Mexico. It allows the future investors, government financing programs or other people of interest to imagine and feel the film before it is made. It has to be a coherent book that knows exactly what it is and what it wants to communicate so there is a lot of thought put into the design and the composition of the presentation. In the visualizations for the feature films we (Oscar Tello and I) had done, we would include not only research photos but also more images that transmit the general look and feel rather than specific location or the type of decoration, which we did not do in the case of this project. For *Mamartuile* we mostly included images of the actual items we needed, the kind of piece it would be as well as how it could be used.

I cannot speak for other parts of the world, but Mexican cinema the art director/production designer is one of the first people to be called when starting the development of a project. Before anyone even knows if the film will get made or not, the art director is already there creating the vision of what it could be. It breathes life into the screenplay, the story and the characters so the idea of a great film would not just be words on paper. The visualization is one of the most important things to have



when applying for funding or promoting a project. Also, it helps the filmmakers themselves to organize the thoughts and to see what kind of locations they might need, what kind of budget it may require and even what kind of casting would be best. Then they can decide to go down an easier path hiring a not so experienced art crew that are cheaper or go big with a known, experienced art director and get outstanding production value.

We started the visualization for *Mamartuile* by looking for images of the actual office of the President in order to make the set feel like a president could be working there. Since no one was going to let us shoot in the National Palace or the Presidential Residence, and the budget constraints were not going to let us rent furniture like that to decorate hallways and other sets in the palace, we only used these photos as a reference. More importantly, the actual offices of the President are full of old-fashioned heavy dark wooden furniture and *décor* which was not what the director wanted.



The Presidential office, The National Palace.

He had an idea of more simple and modern style sets, more bright and more minimalistic. He mentioned Paolo Sorrentino as a visual reference and gave us a Kenzo commercial directed by Spike Jonze as reference of a kind of interior of the palace he was imagining.



Kenzo World commercial, 2016,  
dir. Spike Jonze.

With this feedback from the director we started looking into other presidential offices that could have a more ‘light’ modern feel. For the palace we included images from the Danish prime minister’s office and the Danish television series *Borgen* (2010-2013) and *Forbrydelsen* (eng. ‘The Killing’, 2007-2012). Taking inspiration from Sorrentino’s films and mixing it with the before mentioned photos, we could already start getting the feeling of the colour palette and type of furniture we were going to need. Now all of this happened before the decision was made to change the time period, although as I mentioned before, it did not influence the art a great deal.



Prime minister’s office, Copenhagen,  
Denmark

Besides filming, the part of visualizing is the one I enjoy most. It is very exciting to start thinking what shape and style the film could take; and exploring the visual references, in collaboration with the team arriving at exciting and sometimes unexpected ideas. It is not that the film before visualizing is a blank page, but the exploration of visual possibilities and development is a very creative as well as rewarding process even though it normally has to be approved by the director.

## SCOUTING

After the visualization was more or less defined, approved by the director and the decorator had joined the project, we had to go out into the city and scout possible options for decoration. This happened before we had the budget approved or had any money so it was more to see what is possible. At this point, our work slowed down considerably, because even though our department was ready to start work full power, the producers were not. The filming got delayed a couple of times for financing and scheduling reasons so we had to go into *hiatus* in order to not generate more expenses.

Since the film industry in Mexico is quite evolved, there are a number of warehouses that specialize in renting props and furniture for different productions. The goal of starting the scouting early was to see what is out there and what kind of deals we could get on the prices. We visited a number of places, including some markets and took pictures of things that might work for us later on. Some of the places we had to go to were far and not as safe as the more tourist-populated districts. It helped me to get to know the city better and how to move around in it with caution.

The first time I went on the scouting I visited three warehouses that belong to the same family with a couple of generations working in the business. The warehouses are located in the most ‘hip’ and expensive area in the city and are just houses filled with furniture, different decoration items and props. It was just a lot of furniture and other things stacked on top of each other up to the ceiling. Sometimes I could not even reach the pieces I wanted to see. I was so overwhelmed by the amount of things that I did not find the items we needed and had to come back the next day to look at all of it again. During the scouting, we visited some warehouses that were arranged and classified according to some sort of system but these ones were completely disorganized and in every meter of it I could spend half an hour just trying to see all the things that were there. However, the next day I came back more calm

and prepared, this time I found options for a lot of the items we were looking for.

The key items that were important for the story were: the President's turntable, his desk, the glass cabinet with the flag and the large cage/nets for the live fish. The turntable was important because the President interacts with it so it had to be a functioning one; it had to be vintage and rather valuable because that is the kind of turntable a president would own. The desk is at the centre of the President's office, it had to be unique, monumental, large enough to give the office a sense of greatness, importance and represent the social class. The scene with the falling flag is an important element in the story that is why it was crucial to have the right kind of cabinet. It had to be big enough to be able to fit a person and so that the flag could fall. This scene is representative of the satire of the short film, making fun of the Mexican government and the President. There is so much effort put into maintaining the surface clean while letting the whole country fall apart. For practical reasons we decided to order a cabinet to be made for us instead of borrowing or renting one. We copied the design from a real cabinet which we had found in the first location that we scouted for the palace. The last thing, the cages for the fish, were an important element because they would demonstrate the absurdity of the whole situation. After the scene at the artificial lake happens, there is a shot of the cages with live fish that are kept in a boat shed meaning that the President is fishing fish that are already there for him to catch. As funny as this element was, it did not end so well, which I will come back to later.

The scouting is also the part where the assistant decorator can use the creative influence by finding interesting objects and suggesting them to the art director and the decorator. Since the assistant is the one that goes out to look for the props and the furniture, besides of all the specific things she has to find, they can present other options that could change the course of the style or give it that something extra to make it more powerful and interesting. The whole time while we were doing the scouting and later buying and preparing things, we kept thinking about

the characters and what kind of spaces they should be. If it is a wood workshop, what kind of wood workshop it would be? Does the President spend a lot of time there working or he just pretends to do so? Which tools would he use and how would they be arranged? If he is fishing, what kind of props would he have? Would he have all the possible best ones and be using them or they would be just for show? Thinking about these possibilities we would look at the scouting photos and think what items could work for the kind of space we wanted to create, and then see if we need to continue searching or not.

In the case of this short film, we went location scouting quite late. Even though we had already done some of the scouting for decoration, since we did not know what the locations will look like we could not make any decisions.

The director already had a particular ranch in mind for the Presidential Residence, but we were not sure what kind of style it would have, what size it would be and what kind of things we would be able to find there. Normally the scouting would happen much earlier, so the art department could start planning according to the possibilities of the space, the lighting, what would have to be moved, how we can get things there and what can we use from what is already at hand at the location. It is crucial, that the location scouting happens with the cinematographer present, so that he can discuss with the art director the lighting and angle possibilities, colours, etc. Because the cinematographer was busy finishing other projects, he did not participate in the first scouting which made it difficult to make decisions, so the scouting had to be done again.

Some locations got changed at the last minute so we had to rethink the strategy on the go. For example, we did not have a place for the President's office until we started shooting in the ranch which already was the second half of the filming. The director just kept saying that we will do it in the ranch house but we had no idea where and how so we had to improvise but at the end everything worked out. Despite some difficulties, the cinematographer and the director were very happy and we were



proud of our work. We could pull it off mostly because we had thought out well all the possible scenarios, we had different options of props and furniture for decoration, so we could make something from what we had. Even if the space was not ideal. Since it was a borrowed location, some additional problems came from having to be extra careful to not damage anything and leave all the furniture exactly how it was. The advantage for me working on this short film was that the people in the art department were professionals and with years of experience in art direction for film, television and commercials. It was an amazing opportunity to be a part of this very skilled team and see how problems get solved spontaneously in stressful situations so the filming could continue without delay.

## PRE-PRODUCTION

After all the research, and scouting the character of the President became more clear and we could start collecting, buying and renting the things we needed. The idea of the character was that we would never see him working or even pretending to do so. He has a lot of hobbies and is always busy doing other things, practicing his dance moves, fishing, working in the wood workshop, going swimming. He is a joke of a president who spends all his time doing other things, taking care of his home, the spaces, everything except his country and his people. That is why the wood workshop had to be messy and the tools used, for example, as well as the fishing rods for the artificial lake scene did not have to be completely new because the President does spend time on these activities. How well and with how much skill he does it is a different question, but he spends time on it nevertheless. Also, most of the props and the costume was made to be a bit ridiculous. The idea at first was that the President would be working on a small table in his wood workshop, but later the director decided that it should be something small, something more useless, so the President ended up working on a wooden spoon. While fishing, the President is wearing rubber pants that make him look more like a cartoon character. One more characterization element we added was a masonic ring. It indicates that even though

the President is inapt, it is clear that he comes from an environment of power. He is in the right group of people and his road to presidency becomes less questionable.



Costume fitting, the President.



Normally when preparing for a movie and visualizing it, the art director would spend a while on analysing the characters in order to figure out what kind of space would this person create. In the case of this short film, considering the genre and its light-hearted nature, we did not have to spend too much time on characterization. Also, because the President clearly does not spend too much time at his office working. In fact, he is not used to working and has no intention in doing it. He is there listening to music, dancing, receiving people, doing everything else except what a president is supposed to do. The President has his advisor Cavazos, who is also a member of the masonic movement and is an ex-military man with a higher status than even the President. He is a form of a babysitter who also takes care of most of the Presidential matters.



Costume fitting, Cavazos.

Before we started collecting all the props we had most of the items approved by the director in order to not have to look for the right props at the last moment. During this stage it is very important to have a clear vision and imagine what the sets could look like from just images of random separate things. It is crucial to think about how it will all come together stylistically and compositionally. We got so many elements from many different places. This is also where the visualization came in handy. Thinking about the kind of colours we chose, what kind of style of furniture, what kind of other decorative elements we could include, etc. It helped to follow the same path for everyone that was involved in the art department. The flag cabinet we ordered was made according to one we found in one of the government-related buildings we scouted at first. The interior of this building was too dark and at the end we did not shoot there but the size of the cabinet was perfect for the scene, we just had to attach a fake lock because in the scene the employee has to go get the housekeeper that has the golden key to open it. It was a very good decision to make our own cabinet that the art director took when we started preparation, because of the sudden location change and the fact that we had to transport it to different locations. Since it was one of the main elements of the short film, it was a 'what if' insurance scenario which helped us a great deal to avoid any problems.

After a long search we found the perfect desk for the President's office, and chairs to go with it. The desk had to be big enough to look like it could belong to a president, be old but also have a modern, or timeless feel that could be combined with different style furniture.



After a very long search the decorator found the right turntable which was actually not working at the time, but at the end we managed to get it fixed and transport it safely. There were some wooden shelves we found on location in the ranch where we were going to film. They were in the same space where we were going to set up the office, so it was very convenient. We only had to remove some items, like the iPod speakers and other things, but left the rest of what was inside as it was. We used one of the shelves to put the turntable on, and it ended up going very well with the rest of the decoration.

For the secretary's office we chose more simple decoration since his office was going to be considerably smaller. As a reference we used the press advisor's office from the television series *House of Cards* (2013- ) as well as this other image from a real press secretary's office.



Some furniture and props for the President's office



The secretary's office, still from the film.





Some furniture and props for the Secretary's office

For the room with the flag we did not need too many things, just the right kind of location. Even though the location for this scene was changed at the last minute, we had luck because it was similar to the one in the Kenzo commercial but had a more antique feel, which went very well with the time period. The director wanted very minimalistic decoration so we left the space empty, the main object being the glass cabinet with the flag.

## DECORATING

We started the filming with the scenes of the flag, the corridors and the office of the secretary. This whole day was a bit spontaneous since we had prepared for another location, the one we had found the glass cabinet in, and almost at the last moment the director changed it to the new one which was in fact perfectly suited for the scene of the flag. There was not really a plan of where and how the office of the secretary was going to be put up. We started the day with filming the flag scene since it was the most important scene of the day. As I mentioned before, there was not much decorating to be done so the important thing we had to figure out was how will the flag fall when the employee of the palace was going to reach inside the cabinet. We used a simple system of attaching a nylon wire to it so the flag would fall once the string was pulled. It was attached to the bow that was holding the flag on the stand. Once pulled, the bow would open hence letting the flag fall down.



Filming in the first location.

A smoke machine was also used for the space to give it more depth. While filming this scene we had a few minor set backs. The little golden key that was supposed to open the cabinet broke after a few takes but thankfully we had some spare keys. This is one of the things any art department should be ready for by having more than one of an important prop in case something like this happens. Also, the employee of the palace was supposed to have a bag/suitcase of special cleaning products. When we arrived at the location, the director did not like any of the options we had for the bag so the art director had to think of other options on the spot. While everyone was preparing, he went out to look for more options and knew exactly where they could be found. In a few hours he came back with 3 more options and thankfully the director liked one of them so our problem was solved.

The bigger problem with the new location was the office of the secretary. Once we arrived at the location, we figured out where we can put it up. However, the place where it was going to work was connected to the spot of the scene of the flag so we could not do anything while they were filming it because it would have made a lot of noise. In order to minimize the delay of the decoration, the art director planned exactly how and where we are going to put the furniture and props for the office while the other scenes were being filmed. Once the flag scene was finished all of us already knew what we were supposed to do and decorated the office in a few hours. We used some of the elements that were already there left by other film crews. There were some mobile walls that we used to separate the space and make it feel more like an office. At the end it was a very difficult day because the 'office space' had a lot of heavy things that needed to be moved and it took a while to clean it up. Because of the delay the cinematographer did not have enough time to light the scene and it ended up feeling a bit fake. Although this scene could have been done better, at the end everyone on the crew did what they could with the time and the resources they had.



For the second part of shooting we went to the ranch 'La Compañía' (eng. 'The Company') in a town called Valle de Bravo which is around 2 hours away from Mexico City. We had three days of filming planned there. The first day the entire crew arrived late to the first location which was in a small field in the area of the ranch. The plan was that the President would be cutting wood outside in the light of the morning. By the time we arrived and prepared the set the beautiful morning light that the director wanted had already gone. Because of that we had to rearrange the wood various times hanging the place to catch nice natural lighting. After this scene was done we went off to prepare the wood workshop while the rest for the crew continued with the shots in the nature that did not need much decoration. In the working plan there was the scene of the President fishing and a couple of other shots. During the filming at the lake there was a lot of trouble with the rain that kept getting the costumes wet so the crew fell behind schedule once again. During the filming of this scene happened one of the 2 unfortunate things of the second part of the filming. The President had to be inside the water fishing with his rubber pants when Cavazos shows up with the update on the Mamartuile situation. Since the lake was artificial, the shore was uneven. It had a concrete structure under the water that had a slight descend for around 5-6 meters into the lake. However, at the end of this structure there was no more reachable surface only the hole to the full depth of the lake. Although we had measured the length of the structure during the scouting, while doing the scene, with the President in the water, the director asked the actor to take some more steps forward. The actor took one step too far and almost fell off from the structure. This was a very dangerous moment since the actor had the rubber pants on that would have filled up with water in seconds if he had fallen in. The weight would have dragged him underwater. Thankfully, he did not fall in, but while trying to keep the balance, threw the fishing rod into the lake and it was impossible to retrieve it. The fishing rod was bought and lent to the production by the decorator who acquired them as collectibles and for using in future productions.



Example of the type of cages for the live fish.

Unfortunately, the people who were responsible for the fish (30-40 fish) did not plan the time it might take to prepare and did not think about a possibility of delay. They put too many fish into too small containers and in a few hours all the fish suffocated and died. The filming got delayed once again and new fish had to be brought in the next day. This proves how important in a filming it is to plan for every possible scenario and be prepared for everything so that terrible things like this, or worse, do not happen.

The wood workshop was a bit of an improvised scenario because even though we had in mind the space where we were going to set it up, we basically improvised the decoration and made something from all the things we had. Between the decorator, two decorator's assistants (one of them was me) and two swings, we decorated it in one day completely from scratch. In a feature film this would almost never happen because it would be too big of a risk to take but since it was a short film, and we only had a few days in the borrowed location, we did the best with what we had. We decided to do it in a corner of the barn where normally the grain is stored.

From the scouting that we had done some weeks ago we had seen some items around the ranch that could work for us in the workshop.



The grain barn, ranch 'La Compañía'.



The wood workshop set at the end of the 2nd day of shooting, almost ready.

From the scouting that we had done some weeks ago we had seen some items around the ranch that could work for us in the workshop. The idea was to make it look like it is being used quite often, that there is someone working there, it is full of things, finished pieces and ones that are in process. There are all kinds of tools, almost everything one could ever want in a wood workshop. We put up the working tables that later we covered in sawdust, put up shelves and brought paint and other materials for woodworking that Oscar Tello already had in his office. On the wooden wall we mounted some perforated hardboard to hang the tools, which we arranged in a more or less symmetrical fashion to make it look orderly and done with care. All the tools we had were new so we made them look older and used with paint and dirt as well as removed any brand names that were visible. We did that also with the paint cans and the electric tools by either brushing it off or putting contact tape of the same colour so it would not stand out. It was necessary because we did not have rights to any of the brands and for a short film there was no point in trying to get the permissions. It was just easier to remove them. We put up some traditional Mexican untreated wooden masks in a symmetrical manner as well which framed the action of the President and Cavazos conversing. It gave the sense of the whole country and its heritage hanging over their heads while the President makes important decisions based on the personal gain.

The thing that I never hear people talk about when they talk about filmmaking is the waiting. The dead time when you are waiting for others to do their part, for the directors to check and approve things or whatever other thing that does not let you move forward. You have to have a lot of patience. Since we were decorating this set while the crew was filming the lake scenes on the other part of the ranch, we spent hours waiting for the art director, the cinematographer and the director to come check the set. We were trying to communicate by sending photos of the progress but you can only get so far without him seeing it in person. The next day when the director and the cinematographer finally had the time to see it, although they liked the set, there was one problem.



It was the bags of grain that the workers had not removed as well as the electricity boxes on the wall in the right corner of the set. It was going to be a problem for some of the shots they were going to make. This proves how important it is to communicate with your crew at all times in order to find out these kind of things early and fix them. This is a very good example of the collaborative effort that is filmmaking that I mentioned in the first part of the thesis. No department can do their job independently without considering other departments, and their needs. There has to be constant communication between people and it has to be productive in order to be successful. This also illustrates very well my point in being very lucky to work with talented professionals that have years of experience. We solved this problem in around 30 min, the bags and the part of the wall that the director did not want to be visible were covered. We had borrowed some wood before for other purposes from the pile they had in the ranch for burning. Knowing that we took a small truck and 5 people and very fast brought enough wood and piled it to cover everything. The wood 'wall cover' we built went very well with the wood workshop set ambience and looked natural and organic.

Having finished the wood workshop set, we had to leave the crew to film there and moved on to preparing the President's office. By this time the space and the way we were going to set up the office was decided so we could start working on it. It was a complicated matter because, as I mentioned before, the location was borrowed.

At first we were thinking about putting it up against the wall with windows in front of the big dining table. However, there was a decorative hole in the wall which none of our brought paintings were going to cover. That is why the decision was made to set it up instead of the seating area with the sofas and move this area almost as it is to the back of the room. This meant that we would have to somehow move the dining table which was over 6 meters long and extremely heavy. The worker responsible for the ranch did not let us take it out of the room, so we had to secretly create another plan. In the back room, there was another, smaller dining table. After measuring the size of the big table and the

size of the room, we realised we can move it there if we manage to move the small table enough to the side to hide it.



The space for the President's office.

This plan sounded perfect but when we tried to move the smaller table we realised it was stuck to the wooden floor, possibly because of the lacquer. This table was made out of 2 smaller square tables and while trying to move the second one, the top of it broke off and one of the producers broke its leg while trying to move it by kicking. So now we had the problem of breaking a table that we were not supposed to move in a borrowed location. At the end we managed to successfully relocate the big table to the back room. Luckily we had in our crew a great carpenter who fixed the broken part before we had to put it all back together. We had to make sure to take photos of every part of the room in order to put all the things back and leave it exactly as it was when we got there.

Since we were still not sure what we were going to use to put the turntable on, we started with the main desk and chairs arrangement. The furniture we had went really well with the wooden decoration of the

room and the big fireplace. We decided to use the two long pieces of furniture that were already there to frame the office in a way that would give it more definition. While decorating, the art director realised that the light from the window was too hard and we could see the big light structures that were lighting the scene through the windows. The decorator had to make a last minute trip to the curtain shop. In a few hours with just some curtain material, scissors and a couple of curtain rods, we covered all the necessary windows. We also changed some paintings to the ones we had brought because they seemed more suitable for the arrangement and the colour scheme.

For the decoration we used some ancient Mexican artefacts, and for the front shelf the art director used a very traditional and symbolic set up of the three sculpture materials, stone, glass and metal. We were lucky in general to have this ranch as our filming location because its interior style represented the right kind of social class that helped us a lot in decorating. This whole set was a mix of things we brought and found on site and it came together bit by bit. At the end everyone was happy with the result. There was also enough space for the camera to move and different options for camera set ups.

After the set of the President's office was ready, there was only the wrap up left. While the crew was filming in the office, we packed up the workshop and cleaned the space. It is a very strange feeling to see something you have been preparing and planning for weeks or months go down in an hour or so. It will probably just appear on screen for a minute or two if we are lucky. In good production design every detail matters so every set has to be fully elaborated and complete does not matter how insignificant it is. It is important to maintain the coherence of the story and the art direction.







The President's office, finished set.

### III CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THIS THESIS

The experience of working in the art department gave me invaluable insight into the process of filmmaking and the reality of preparing the art, the sets of a film. Having worked in production before, I was familiar with the organizational and administrative side of the process. However, this experience let me grasp the scope of what working in art actually entails. What kind of decisions need to be made and how it influences the look of the film. That it is much more than just set dressing, there is construction involved, budgeting, coordination, a lot of planning among other things. Preparing the art for a film is a very long process that starts very early in the development stage of the project. There has to be extensive research done in order for the sets to be true to the characters and the cultural context. It is a very exciting process because the look of the film is like a growing life form. It progresses and develops throughout the preparation and at the end is a mixture of different ideas, history, cultural aspects and story elements that all come together into one strong image. This preparation that the production designer does in the early stages is crucial because it defines the visual style of the film. It helps for everyone involved in the process to better understand what they are working towards to. Also, it can help the producers to understand the story, to realize what it needs and prepare the budget accordingly as well as allows them to attract investment by being able to explain in visual terms, what the project will be about.

Although the amount of creative freedom may vary from project to project, production designers job literally touches everything that is visible on screen and an image can have immense power over its audiences. Creating production design for a film is creating iconic images that can stay in the viewers' minds for years, inspire, and influence future generations of filmmakers or not. It is creating images like the church in *True Detective*, the alien ship in *Arrival* or the unique set design in *Dogville*.

'At a very basic level, sets provide a film with its inimitable look, its geographical, historical, social, and cultural contexts and associated material details, and the physical framework within which a film's narrative is to proceed. Beyond these qualities, sets aid in identifying characters, fleshing out and concretising their psychology; and, often in conjunction with other contributing elements such as music and lighting, they help in creating a sense of place in terms of 'mood' or 'atmosphere', and thus evoke emotions and desires that complement or run counter to the narrative. In these latter respects, sets are also crucial in determining a film's genre, and they play a defining role in popular formats as varied as historical drama, science fiction, horror, melodrama, and the musical.' [38]

What the writers here are talking about is the general level, function of the set to the film but it is already clear on how many levels it influences the outcome. The work of the art department determines the success of the film and explores, elevates or ruins the potential a story/script can have. Of course, production design cannot function on its own, without the cinematographer, director and all the other people involved in the process. A set can be just a room until someone points a camera at it and it becomes a film image. Nevertheless, the art department's work is absolutely essential and it is not only what is visible directly on screen.

'You need skilled people that know what they're doing to put those things into the sets so that it's believable, to go back to what we were talking about with history. You have to believe that those things have been there for all of this time. That goes for set dressers, that goes for scenic artists who put the age on the walls, who scuff things up and add dust or spills or cigarette burns. All that stuff, even if it's not perceivable on its own, on a subconscious level the sum of the parts really affects the audience. That stuff is crucial.' [39]

However, preparing the art for a film is not only about putting in as much detail as possible. It is also about making the right decisions in terms of budgeting, logistics and practicality without sacrificing the overall quality of the image or the essential elements of the story. It is about distribution of resources to the parts of the story that have a greater impact in terms of character or dramatic, emotional effect, to create production value where it is needed and is most powerful.

For me as a foreigner, participating in the creation of *Mamartuile* was especially challenging. Creating a set of any kind requires an understanding of the cultural conditions of the particular place, time period and traditions. In order to create a genuine setting for the character it is crucial to understand what kind of object this particular person, with the particular background would have in this time period and in this space. I had to do additional research in order to better grasp the cultural setting and the historical context. It was important for me to first understand and imagine the reality of the living and working spaces of a Mexican President and only then combine this knowledge with the specific artistic ideas (inspired by Sorrentino films and Kenzo commercial) we had for the sets. Also, I had to be careful and make sure I was understanding everything correctly since I was communicating in my third language. For making the breakdowns, for example, my vocabulary was not wide enough to complete them alone so I had to do it together with the art director. Or while going scouting I always had to make sure I was looking for the right thing. Even though my Spanish was good enough to communicate without difficulty on a daily basis, I had to make sure there would not be important things lost in translation. I had to be careful to not misinterpret important details and that there would not be any miscommunication on my part since we were working as a team to create a coherent setting for the story.

After seeing the final version of *Mamartuile*, I realised for myself how important every piece of the set was for the overall image. Why it was so important to not use whatever turntable we could find that fit the colour scheme, or find the perfect desk for the President. The hours I spent in the market looking for the perfect wooden masks for the wood workshop or the time we spent going to places and not finding anything – everything, every effort and detail of every person on the crew made it happen. All the small details in every set, even if it is not noticeable directly, matters because it is about creating a story, an ambience of history. That is why good art direction is so important for the success of the film. It is because the image has to feel like there is history there, like every piece of decoration appeared there for a reason it has to feel right to the

audience. Only then the story can reach its full potential and profundity.

Film, for me, like other art forms, is a means of communication. Art in film then is not just a tool of telling the story that is written, but a key means of exploring the possibilities and the uniqueness of film as a visual medium. To use this medium to examine and experiment with the visual language and move away from the actual text. To elevate it, to tell it in a way only cinema can. Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (1973) is a perfect example of an authentic and powerful visual language that is unique and possible only in this medium. The production design that credits Alejandro Jodorowsky himself, creates a completely different world from the one the audience lives in and is the prime communicator. The images in *The Holy Mountain* are charged with meaning and symbols constituting an intense visual experience. In Peter Greenaway's words: 'A good filmmaker should be a prime creator-a composer, not a conductor.' [40].

That is why I think that the work of the art department deserves more attention, analysing, in order to understand the full extent of the power of visual language. More extensive, in depth research and analysis of production design could help to better understand the effect of visual media on the viewers' daily lives and perception of the visual world. I think that the investigation into the work of the art department should be as detailed and as thorough as their work, because on screen, every detail makes a difference. This final product, the image that is seen by its audiences, is what stays in people's minds and forms them, it becomes part of the collective memory and future creations. It is important to discuss the work of the art department not only to unravel the possibilities of film as a medium but also to understand its full effect on the viewers, visual culture, history and society.

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